

Soil Health Stewards:
Promoting Soil Health on Protected Agricultural Lands
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As you embark on the Soil Health Stewards training, feel free to use this guide to reflect on your learning throughout. We hope this guide helps you to formulate the Soil Health Stewards Action Plan for your organization at the close of the training.

Background information about the Soil Health Stewards Program:

We are excited that your organization has chosen to participate in AFT's Soil Health Stewards Program, aimed at increasing adoption of soil health practices on permanently protected agricultural land. By building the capacity of people such as yourself to engage the landowners and producers you work with around soil health benefits, barriers, and practices, we seek to influence how these landowners and farmers steward their land, leading to healthier soils, increased climate resiliency, and greater economic opportunities on the more than six million acres of permanently protected agricultural land in the U.S.

For this initial training and grant round, we have selected seventeen entities from Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Ohio, all of whom hold easements on land protected through USDA's Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP). Each entity will receive a \$10,000 grant to enable two staff to attend the 2.5-day virtual training and to develop programing to engage landowners and producers around soil health.

In addition to the training and \$10,000 grant, entities will receive an additional year of technical assistance from AFT for their outreach efforts. Support will include periodic networking calls and individualized assistance to partners.

Requirements for Entity Participation:

- Dedicate up to two staff to attend the virtual Soil Health Stewards training on September 8, 9, and 10, 2021. Staff must attend the entire training and participate in all activities and discussions.
- Develop a Soil Health Steward Action Plan describing actions the organization will take to promote soil health with landowners and farmers, including those who own or manage land on which the organization or agency holds an easement. Time will be set aside during the training for initial draft plan development.
- A final version of the plan will be due by October 31, 2021.
- Participate in project evaluation by August 31, 2022. The evaluation includes a required pre- and post-training survey, an impact assessment and an optional interview with AFT program staff and consultants.

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Session #1: Welcome and Introductions

Session objective: Introduce the group and training objectives in a fun and productive way. Participants start building relationships for the future to support everyone's soil health work.

What are some of your personal goals while participating in this training?

After hearing introductions, is there someone you wish to connect with?

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Session #2: Engaging Landowners Around Soil Health: Introduction

Session objective: Explore the many ways that participants and their organizations can engage landowners and producers around soil health. Identify potential sensitivities and challenges associated with this engagement.

To what extent does your organization already engage landowners and operators around soil health Through what avenues?

What opportunities do you see for further engagement?

What do you need to help your organization pursue these opportunities?

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Session #3: Soil Health: Basics, Practices, Benefits, & Barriers – Part 1

Session objective: Introduce participants to the meaning and broad benefits of “soil health.” Explore how soil health relates to regenerative agriculture, climate resiliency and other environmental benefits. Review the four soil health management systems principles, what conservation practices improve soil health, and what some of the barriers to adoption are that farmers face.

Where in your community have you seen signs of poor soil health? Where have you seen signs of healthy high functioning soils? How might you use these local examples for improving soil health awareness and adoption with your stakeholders?

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Are there key concepts or ways to articulate aspects of soil health that you'd like to incorporate into your communications with landowners and producers? Is there anything you learned that particularly surprised you – any aha moments?

What barriers to adopting soil health management practices and systems do you think impact farmers in your area?



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Session #4: Soil Health: Basics, Practices, Benefits, & Barriers – Part 2

Session objective: Familiarize participants with AFT-NRCS Soil Health Economic and Environmental Case Studies, which provide calculated estimates of the costs, benefits, and return on investment experienced by “soil health successful farmers,” and estimates of water quality and climate benefits. Discuss ways these materials can be used with landowners and producers to encourage soil health practice adoption.

Which findings from the case studies did you find most compelling?

Which case studies or materials (e.g., individual farmer slides or summary slides) did you find most useful? How do you think you’ll use them with your landowners and producers to encourage soil health practice adoption?

Are there conservation professionals in your community that you and your organization might build a relationship with to provide soil health mentoring support to landowners and farmers?

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Session #5: Working with Diverse Owners and Operators

Session objective: Deepen participant understanding of issues specific to certain landowners and producers (non-operating landowners; Black, Indigenous and People of Color landowners and producers; women landowners and producers; operators with insecure land tenure).

What's one goal you think your organization could set to improve engagement with a more diverse population of producers and landowners?

How might you lean on external resources and support to improve your team's cultural competency and communication skills around diverse audiences?



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**Session #6: Review: The Basics, Practices, Benefits, and Barriers to
Healthy Soils**

Session objective: Provide a space for participants to review and practice articulating the benefits and barriers to improving soil health.

What are the key takeaways from yesterday's training? How would you articulate the benefits of soil health to a producer or landowner?



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Session #7: Resource Assessment Tools

Session objective: Offer participants a chance to dig into one of two tools that can be used to promote soil health. Those who choose Soil Health Assessments will learn more about how an assessment is conducted and when it might be used. Those who choose COMET Planner will learn the basics about the tool and how it can be used to engage producers and landowners around soil health.

What are three things you learned about assessing soil health and/or about using COMET Planner that are particularly relevant for you? How will you use what you learned into your action plan?

What key messages related to these tools may particularly inspire “a-ha” moments for those you work with?



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**Session #8: Advancing Soil Health Through Agricultural Conservation Easements
and Referenced Plans**

Session objectives: Deepen participant understanding of how soil health is addressed in NRCS conservation plans/planning, how management and conservation plans can be used as a tool to engage landowners and producers around soil health, how leases can be used by non-operating landowners to encourage or incentivize practices that improve soil health, and the pros and cons of using easement deed terms and conditions to achieve conservation objectives.

How might you use a conservation or management plan to engage an owner of protected land around soil health?

In negotiating an easement purchase or donation in the future, what approaches might you use to proactively promote soil health with the landowner?

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Session #9: Engaging Landowners and Operators

Session objective: Increase participant comfort level in discussing soil health conditions and options with landowners and producers

What are some of the communications techniques you might use to discuss soil health with landowners and producers?

Who are some “trusted messengers” in your network or community that you might look to support landowners or producers with improving soil health on their land?



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Session #10: Connecting Landowners to Soil Health Technical and Financial Resources

Session objectives: Strengthen participant connections with the network of resource providers in their state; deepen understanding of available technical and financial resources available to landowners and producers to improve soil health and how to access those resources; identify strategies with key resource providers to address barriers and expand adoption of soil health practices on permanently protected farmland.

Make note of the soil health-related technical and financial assistance resources highlighted:

Resource Name	Type (technical or financial assistance)	Availability	Limitations

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What are some technical and/or financial assistance resources you learned about in this session that you'd like to integrate with your current/future engagements with landowners?



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Session #11: Leveraging Public and Private Funding to Help Finance Soil Health Practices

Session objective: Familiarize participants with private market opportunities, including carbon and water quality credit markets, and with public programs that can be used to foster innovative collaborations to encourage or incentivize specific conservation practice adoption or outcome-based pay for performance approaches.

What information might you give to a landowner or producer about private carbon or water quality credit markets?

Who would be logical partners to collaborate with in developing a proposal to finance soil health practice adoption on land on which you hold easements?

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Session #12: Expanding and Untethering Soil Health Programing

Session objective: Foster creative approaches to promoting soil health among landowners and producers beyond those involving easement acquisition and stewardship.

What new strategies can you imagine your organization taking on to promote soil health, especially with landowners or farmers who may be unfamiliar with or skeptical of new approaches?



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Session #13: Debrief and Action Plan Refinement

Session objective: Encourage participants to articulate key concepts learned through the training, and to use these key concepts in beginning to develop the entity's action plan to guide increased programming around soil health for the next 12 months.

When thinking about the past three days, what are the top three things you found most helpful?

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When thinking about the past three days, what are the top three things you want to learn more about to be able to make a greater impact? How will you incorporate that into your action plan?

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What are three potential actions you feel most excited about for their ability to target your biggest opportunities for making an impact?

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